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I. LAND AND PEOPLE

1. Gabon is a central African State located on the Gulf of Guinea. Straddling the equator, 75 per cent of its land is covered by the Ogoué Basin and 90 per cent by equatorial forests. A sedimentary basin 800 km long by 20 - 300 km wide links it to the Atlantic Ocean. With an area of 267,667 square kilometres, it is bordered by Cameroon to the north, Equatorial Guinea to the north-west, the Congo to the east and south and the Atlantic Ocean to the west.

2. According to a 1993 census, Gabon had a population of 1,011,710 inhabitants, with an annual population growth of 2.5 per cent, partly due to a positive migratory balance. The infant mortality rate is 6 per cent, the birth rate is 42.2/1,000 compared to a death rate of 19.81/1,000.

Education

3. Considerable efforts are being made to encourage school attendance by children.

Religion

4. Up to 1960, there were Catholic missionaries, Protestants and a few isolated Muslims living in Gabon. In the 1970s and 1980s, after Gabon joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a number of Muslims settled in Gabon in a display of Islamic solidarity. Today, the population of Gabon is mostly Christian. Catholics are the largest group, followed by Protestants. The proportion of Muslims composed of foreigners is very small.

II. ECONOMY

5. Gabon's economy grew at a nominal rate of about 14 per cent in 1996 and 4.5 per cent in 1997. Owing to the moderate increase in prices resulting from the drop in the price of oil, real growth rose from 3.2 per cent to 3.9 per cent.

Growth of gross domestic product (GDP)

	1995	1996	1997
Total GDP	2 475.20	2 821.80	2 954.20
GDP excluding oil	1 489.50	1 623.00	1 757.00
GDP including oil	985.70	1 198.80	1 197.20

6. This growth was partly the result of the strong performance of the non-oil sector, whose GDP rose by 8.3 per cent in 1997 thanks to an 8.5 per cent rise in domestic demand and steady sales of the main export products. However, the contribution of the oil sector stagnated (-0.1 per cent in 1997) as the drop in the price of oil resulted in reduced income in this sector.

7. GDP cost components grew considerably, especially investment in the non-oil sector, which rose by 20.1 per cent. Government expenditure on goods and services fuelled total consumption, which increased by 7.7 per cent in 1997 despite the late implementation of the budget.

Employment

8. Private sector employment grew at a moderate pace during the first half of 1997. Despite a large number of job offers, the employment rate in the private sector fell considerably compared to the previous year, one of the main reasons being the lack of skilled labour for the types of jobs offered. Public sector employment remained stable.

Salaries and prices

(a) Salaries

9. The private sector wage bill grew by 8 per cent owing to wage drifts, continued growth and the impact on employment of the measures agreed on at the "Concentration 97" meetings.

(b) Controlled price movements

10. During the first half of 1997, consumer price indexes registered contrasted growth. The consumer price index (CPI) for high-income households (155 articles) showed little, though constant growth, whereas the CPI for low-income households (125 articles) reflected irregular growth.

11. The high-income household index performed satisfactorily on an annual basis from June 1996 to June 1997, as the general rise in prices was only 0.9 per cent, whereas it had been 2.6 per cent for the same period the previous year. Prices were expected to fall on the back of the announced 17.5 per cent cut in water and electricity rates. Consequently, the general index did not exceed the 3 per cent increase mark at the end of December 1997.

Budget execution in line with the International Monetary Fund programme

12. Efforts to improve public finances after the currency devaluation continued in 1997. The constant rise in revenue and the curbing of ordinary State expenditure made it easier to tackle an extremely heavy debt burden.

13. Budgetary receipts grew by 18.5 per cent as against 2.8 per cent in 1996. At the end of 1997, they totalled 885 billion CFA francs. This increase was mainly due to oil revenue, estimated at 555 billion CFA francs.

14. Ordinary expenses, up 10.9 per cent in 1997 as against 7.3 per cent in 1996, accounted for 18.3 per cent of national wealth. This significant growth in ordinary expenditure was explained mainly by the recovery of public-sector investment (27.3 per cent compared to 3.7 per cent in 1996) as a result of the need to support the economy and the social sectors.

15. Operating expenses stood at 345.6 billion CFA francs, while investment-related expenditure totalled 173.2 billion CFA francs. Total

pre-debt-service expenditure amounted to 527.8 CFA francs, resulting in a primary surplus of 357.2 billion CFA francs. Consequently, the debt service was estimated at 392 billion CFA francs compared to 427.8 billion as per the 1997 appropriation.

Government policy

16. The Government's economic policy has five objectives:

(a) Stimulation of the non-oil sector by liberalizing and diversifying the economy while promoting confidence in the business sector through the substantial reduction of domestic arrears;

(b) General curbing of public expenditure to achieve a primary balance representing 10 per cent of GDP;

(c) Strengthening of management and budgetary control mechanisms;

(d) Easing of the tax burden on individuals through a revision of the tax scale;

(e) Offering of a tax incentive to companies in order to encourage the creation of jobs for Gabonese youth.

Structural measures

17. The Government is committed to pursuing and consolidating measures implemented within the framework of the current medium-term adjustment programme.

Improvement of the legal and institutional framework

18. In 1997, specific measures were taken, of which the most important were:

The reduction of the corporation tax from 40 per cent to 35 per cent for the tax years following 1 January 1997;

Fixed registration fees for deeds and transfers;

Discontinuation of lump-sum payments by employers and of the vocational training tax provided for under the General Code for Direct and Indirect Taxes since 1 July 1997;

Repeal of Decree No. 820/87 of 2 October 1987 requiring payment for the processing of customs clearance documents by computer.

19. In the search for improved business promotion, meetings were held between the Head of State, the Minister of Labour, the Minister of Finance and economic actors. Economic management efforts will continue in 1998, especially:

In the relationship between State and enterprises. To this end, the Government must have a new mindset in order to transform these relations, often seen as antagonistic, into complementary and cooperative ones;

At the economic management level. The Government, with the help of the Bretton Woods institutions, has been trying, since the implementation of the structural adjustment programme, to improve the country's macroeconomic situation and keep a lasting balance.

20. In its desire to launch fully into a strategy of economic and social development based on the full expansion of the private sector, the Government will implement the investment charter in 1998. The charter will aim to:

Promote and process investment, regardless of origin;

Reduce administrative formalities for the setting up of companies by the establishment of a single window and an investment promotion agency;

Adapt the Labour Code to the current context;

Bring vocational training into line with the needs of the labour market;

Adapt the resources of the financial sector to the needs of investors.

III. HISTORY AND GENERAL POLITICAL STRUCTURE

21. Gabon became independent on 17 August 1960. The Gabonese Republic adopted its first Constitution on 21 February 1961.

22. The first President of the Gabonese Republic, Léon M'ba, died on 28 November 1967 and was succeeded, in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution, by the Vice-President of the Republic, Omar Bongo, who is still in office.

23. The Gabonese Gabonese Party was created on 12 March 1968 within the context of a one-party system. However, the course of events on the international scene paved the way for a return to a multi-party system following the National Conference held in 1990. The Conference brought together representatives of the former single party, as well as opposition parties, in addition to several political, trade union and religious associations. The return to a multi-party System was confirmed by the constitutional reform of 22 May 1990 and the first multi-party general elections took place from September to October 1990. The National Assembly adopted a new Constitution and a Political Parties Charter on 15 March 1991.

24. The Gabonese Republic reviewed the Constitution, through Law No. 3/91 of 26 March 1991, as amended by Law No. 1/94 of 18 March 1994, in order to disband the Supreme Court and create three new independent, autonomous courts: the Judicial Court, the Administrative Court and the Revenue Court.

25. According to the Gabonese Constitution (Law No. 3/91 of 26 March 1991, as amended by Law No. 1/94 of 18 March 1994, as amended by Law No. 18/95 of 29 September 1995 and Law No. 1/97 of 22 April 1997), the President of the Republic is the Head of State. He is the guarantor of territorial integrity, national unity, observance of the Constitution and international treaties. He is elected by direct universal suffrage for a seven-year term, which may be extended only once art. 9 of the Constitution: Law No. 1 of 22 April 1997).

26. The new Constitution, amended by Law No. 1/97 of 22 April 1997, created the post of Vice-President (title II, art. 14 (a), of the Constitution). Article 14, paragraphs (b), (c), (d) and (e), define the powers and functions of the Vice-President. The Prime Minister (art. 15 of the Constitution) is the Head of Government. As such, he directs government action.

27. Legislative power is vested in a two-chamber Parliament: the National Assembly and the Senate. The members of the National Assembly are called deputies and are elected for five years by direct universal suffrage (title III, art. 35, of the Constitution). Members of the Senate are called senators and are elected for six years by indirect universal suffrage (title III, art. 35, of the Constitution).

28. In the absence of the President of the Republic for any reason, the functions of President of the Republic, except for those provided for in articles 18, 19 and 116, paragraph 1, are temporarily exercised by the President of the Senate (art. 13 of the Constitution).

29. The legislature monitors the executive through: summonses, oral questions, inquiry and monitoring commissions and motions of censure (exercised by the National Assembly).

30. The judicial power is independent of the legislative and executive powers and is covered in title V, of the Constitution.

IV. GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH HUMAN RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED

31. The Human Rights Department was set up in 1987 and entrusted with the mandate of applying government human rights policy and coordinating initiatives taken in this regard. The Ministry of Justice and Human Rights is currently focusing its efforts on the protection and promotion of human rights.

32. The preamble of the Constitution affirms the country's commitment to the basic human rights and fundamental freedoms defined in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and embodied in the 1981 African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the 1990 National Charter of Freedoms.

V. INFORMATION AND PUBLICITY

33. Information on and the dissemination of international human rights instruments at the national level will be at the heart of the promotion of such rights.